

On the Cultural Heritage of the Pashai

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The Pashai-speaking people is a linguistic group of about 100,000 persons who live in eastern Afghanistan; they inhabit a number of side-valleys to the main Panjshir, Kabul, Kunar, and Pech valleys, from Nijrau and Tagau in the west to Kodar in the north-east. Their neighbours to the north are the Nuristani who were, until their conversion to Islam in the late 19th century, the "Kafirs of the Hindu Kush" (Robertson 1896).

The particular distribution of the Pashai-speaking groups, and the peculiarity that the many local communities live "isolated" from one another by virtue of the presence of the Pakhtuns who inhabit the main valleys, has had consequences both for the self-perception, or ethnic consciousness, among the Pashai and for the development and orientation of the scholarly investigations devoted to the Pashai within the fields of linguistics, history, and anthropology. It is the aim of this paper in the first place briefly to examine the possible relationship between the distribution pattern and the conclusions reached by historical-linguistic scholarship regarding the distant past, or "origin," of the Pashai groups; I shall argue, following the lead of Lincoln Keiser (1974), that the former has unduly influenced the latter. Secondly, I shall present an account of the more recent past of one particular Pashai group, based on ethnohistorical data collected during anthropological fieldwork¹ and my anthropologi-

cal interpretation of these data as well as of the few available historical sources.

In the critical attitude towards some of the results of previous scholarship, this paper may be seen as a sequel to an earlier publication (Ovesen 1983a) in which I examined the historical circumstances which led to the emergence of ethnic identities among the Nuristani and the Pashai, and, among other things, questioned the pertinence from a historical-anthropological point of view, of the sharp linguistic division between the Dardic and the Nuristani languages. These arguments will be only briefly alluded to here.

1. Morgenstierne's Hypothesis

Even though the name "Pashai" was first mentioned in the Western literature by Marco Polo, it was only with the publication of Vol. 8 of Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (1919) that the linguistic unity of the various Pashai dialects was established, i. e., that Pashai was classified as a separate language of the Dardic group of the Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-Iranian. Soon after, Georg Morgenstierne (1926) began what was to become a life-long devotion to the study of the Dardic and Nuristani languages, one major result

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Council for the Humanities. – When referring to contemporary phenomena, the present tense is the "ethnographic present" of my fieldwork, i. e., prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. – In my efforts to think systematically about my field material, I have benefitted from conversations and correspondence with a number of colleagues; in relation to the contents of the present paper I would especially like to thank the following: Asger Christensen, Kirsten Hastrup, Lincoln Keiser, and Michael Meeker. A first draft of the paper was read by Josef Elfenbein, Peter Snoy, and Bo Utas, to whom I am most grateful for their both critical and encouraging comments; the responsibility for not following all their suggestions is, of course, my own.

of which was his three volumes on the Pashai language (1944, 1956, 1967). The linguistic unity of Pashai on the one hand, and the pattern of demographic distribution of the Pashai-speaking groups on the other, gave rise to a historical question: Assuming a one-time geographical contiguity of speakers of one and the same language, what was the earlier contiguous geographical area in which Pashai was spoken? Morgenstierne proposed the hypothesis that Pashai was earlier spoken all over the upper part of the main Kabul Valley, being the language of ancient Kapisa and Lampaka-Nagarahara, "the two north-western-most centres of pre-Muslim Hindu-Buddhist civilization" (1967: 11; cf. 1944: vii), and that the Pashai speakers were later driven up into the narrow side-valleys where they are now found by Pakhtuns invading the Kabul Valley.

With Morgenstierne's background in Indo-European historical linguistics, this hypothesis may just appear logical. I shall not here discuss the theoretical problems of *linguistic* historical reconstructions (cf. Ardener 1971); but we should note that the hypothesis is a very general one, formulated on a rather high level of abstraction. Even so, some non-linguists have treated the hypothesis as if it related to a *specific historical sequence*, i. e., as if it was an undisputed historical fact that "the ancestors of the Pashai hill tribes lived in the central region of the classic Gandhāra culture before they were expelled to the mountain valleys south of Kafiristan" (Jettmar 1959: 86; cf. Kolig 1970: 281). This is where my objection comes in. In the first place, Morgenstierne's hypothesis, if accepted at face value, "explains" much more than it was actually designed for, and, secondly, in order to explain what was meant to be explained, a hypothesis of such wide-ranging ramifications is not really necessary. This latter point was already implicitly made by Keiser who pointed to the possibility that the Pashai language, as well as the other "Dardic" languages, "were brought into the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram by Indo-Aryan migrations before the Kapisa and Nangrahar civilizations were destroyed by the Afghans" (1974: 448), and that, consequently, it is perfectly possible (and, I would say, likely) that "the ancestors of the Pashai hill tribes occupied the area where they are presently found before the expansion of the Afghans" (*ibid.*: 450). Moreover,

with respect to geographical contiguity we do not need to think that contact should have been possible only by way of the main Kabul Valley; thus Keiser (1974: 449) has presented data for several migrations between neighbouring valleys, and my own data supply further cases; Wutt (1981) has in a map summed up most of the information on local inter-valley migrations. Evidence for frequent communication in the very recent past between local communities is found in my short account of the *marat* institution (Ovesen 1981a: 230–233).

As for the former part of the objection, the hypothesis invests the contemporary tribally organized Pashai groups of mountain agriculturalists and herders with a historical past as part of a major plains civilization of a Hindu-Buddhist cultural type, and thus posits a sharp contrast between the Pashai and their immediate neighbours to the north, the Nuristani, who "have probably inhabited their secluded valleys since time immemorial, and have never belonged to the community of civilized Indian peoples" (Morgenstierne 1944: vii). This sharp division between the Pashai and the Nuristani as regards their presumed ancient histories accords very well with the linguistically accepted division which has the Pashai language belonging to the 'Dardic' branch of Indo-Aryan on the one hand, and the Nuristani languages, classified as a separate branch in between Iranian and Indo-Aryan, on the other (Morgenstierne 1965, 1974; Fussmann 1972; Strand 1973; Buddruss 1977). But this division may seem a little strange, inasmuch as the "Dardic" branch is, in the first place, just a residual category comprising the "left-overs" from the classification of Indo-Aryan languages (Morgenstierne 1965: 139), and secondly, as there is a considerable overlap of distinctive features between Pashai and the Nuristani languages (Morgenstierne 1967: 7). I have argued elsewhere (Ovesen 1983a) that the historical events of the late 19th century may in some measure have been responsible for the way the two language groups have been viewed by linguistic scholarship, and I have here, conversely, suggested that the historical-linguistic hypothesis about the Pashai language has entailed certain, I believe unwarranted, assumptions about the historical past of the two groups of people, the Pashai and the Nuristani.

I suggest, in short, that scholars of historical linguistics and historical ethnology have too uncritically made use of each other's evidence, which at a first glance does indeed seem mutually reinforcing. But I believe that the apparent concordance is deceptive. As a way out of the circularity, Keiser (1974) has already adduced some social and culture-historical evidence, notably in his detailed demonstration of the over-all similarity of Pashai and Nuristani kinship systems. The impression of similarity between the Pashai and the Nuristani in terms of social structure is strengthened if we look at social stratification. The Pashai have a caste-like system of status groups which might indicate an "Indian" origin, but, as I have hinted elsewhere (Ovesen 1982), a comparison with data from the Nuristani (Jones 1974: 94-116) reveals that the latter have a similar system, which is even more caste-like by virtue of a stronger emphasis on the notions of "pure" and "impure." So if stratification suggests an "Indian" origin for the Pashai, such a suggestion could be even more forcefully made for the Nuristani.

The same applies to the reconstructions which may be made in the history of religions. Little as we know about the pre-Islamic religion of the Pashai (Jettmar 1975: 21, 29), it is at least certain that the Pashai of today still share with both the Nuristani and the "Dardic" peoples further to the east a rather un-Hindu and un-Buddhist fascination with the goat (Ovesen 1983b), a fascination which might in pre-Islamic times perhaps have deserved the label "religious worship." Fussmann (1977), in an interesting treatment of Nuristani and Dardic religious and social systems of the past, has suggested equally Indian (pre-Hindu) origins for both:

It is now quite sure that the so-called dardic languages, spoken in remote corners of the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram ranges, are indo-aryan ones and the culture of the people, before the advent of Islam, was a true indian one. Near by the dardic people, the Kafirs of the Hindu-Kush had no contact with the indian world, except through the dardic area. But their languages go back to the language of an advance-guard of the indo-iranian invaders: they go back to a stage later than common indo-iranian, but earlier than vedic sanskrit. As for the religious vocabulary, most of the generic words as well as most of the god names look indian. Some kafir myths sound like vedic ones. We can suppose that, like the kafir languages, the kafir religion

goes back, in many cases, to pre-vedic times (Fussmann 1977: 69-70; from the author's own English summary).

The last part of Fussmann's paper argues that the Nuristani social system is very close to the Indian *varna* ideal and could thus be seen as (almost) a living example of the proto-typical caste system.

All these bits of evidence seem to me to point in one and the same direction, namely toward a closer *cultural* affinity between the Nuristani and the Pashai than Morgenstierne's hypothesis will admit. My own position is that we should rather think of the Nuristani and the Pashai as having the same kind of distant past, that is, as groups of aboriginal Indo-Aryan hill tribes of the Hindu Kush than of the Pashai as "degenerate" descendants of bearers of a former grand civilization. Among the aboriginal hill tribes are also counted the rest of the "Dardic" groups to the north-east of Nuristani (see Strand 1973 for a list of the linguistic groups). Personally, I find the insistence on the special linguistic position of the Nuristani languages rather awkward in the light of the general cultural similarity between the Nuristani and the "Dardic" groups. I am not hereby arguing for an over-all cultural homogeneity of all the groups in "Dardistan";² I am only saying that,

² The area has been known as "Dardistan" since G. W. Leitner coined the term in 1866. Its indigenous form notwithstanding, it is thus a Western construct and not a very fortunate one, since it confers upon the area and its population a sense of unity which does not agree with the ethnographic and historical facts (see Clarke 1977 for a critique of the term and an evaluation of the ethnographic literature on north-west Himalaya). A more indigenous label for the same territory is Bolor (or Boloristan); this designation had appeared in Chinese sources already in the 8th century (see Jettmar 1977 for a historical overview), but there have been differing opinions as to its extension ever since. Raverty quotes Mirza Haidar to the following effect: "Boloristan is a *kafiristan*; on the east it adjoins Kashgar and Yarkand; its northern part adjoins Badakhshan; on its west is Kabul and Lamghan; and on the south Swat and Kashmir" (1881-1888: 139). With the European interest in the area in the 19th century came a quest for geographical "precision," which resulted in Bolor being found to be a rather elusive designation because it was primarily a label employed by outsiders. For that reason the name Bolor had gone out of fashion among Europeans (see Davidson 1902: 189-192 for a review of the controversies which the use of the name gave rise to), but it is still occasionally employed in Afghanistan with the meaning ascribed to it by Mirza Haidar.

fellows Bhim and Shultan had been "lost" (i. e., converted) and the land was yielding poorly due to insufficient fertilizing, so they decided it was time to leave the area and migrated eastwards. The village of Bambakot had previously been a sort of commercial center, with a considerable bazaar known as the Hindu Quarter, but when the Hindus left, the bazaar declined. Deishamir had expanded down to Shewa and he made an alliance with the Sayyeds of the Shewa region by giving a daughter in marriage to the Sayyed Mia Abbas of Islampur.

This ethnohistorical account is an edited version, composed from bits of information from a number of informants throughout the valley. The degree of consistency of the statements by different informants was quite high and the number of contradictory statements correspondingly small; nothing in the above version was contradicted by any of my informants, and much of the information is corroborated in the material collected previously and independently by Wutt (1978, 1981).

A search for written sources on historical events in Darra-i Nur yields very little. The valley was first mentioned by Mahmud of Ghazni's chronicler; in A. D. 1020–1021 Mahmud of Ghazni launched a campaign against the *kafirs* of Darra-i Nur. Raverty cites the Gardezi to the effect that Mahmud's troops conquered the valley, established a fortress, and left a garrison, and that the population was subjugated and forced to embrace the faith of Islam; "and soon the true faith began to prosper therein" (Raverty 1881–1888: 135). Apparently that state of affairs did not continue, however, for when the Moghul emperor Babur visited the area about 500 years later, Darra-i Nur was still famous for its wine, while the eating of pork had only recently been forbidden (Beveridge 1922: 212). The neighbouring valley of Alingar was forcibly converted to Islam by Mohammad Hakim, a brother of the Moghul emperor Akbar, in 1582 (Scarcia 1965), but this did not affect Darra-i Nur; in 1625 the emperor Jahangir met with a deputation of *kafirs* from Darra-i Nur in Jalalabad (Raverty 1881–1888: 141). When Amir Abdur Rahman sent his forces to Kafiristan in 1895–1896, the Pashai population in the upper parts of the valleys east and north of Darra-i Nur appears to have been

kafir still (Jones 1969: *passim*), while Darra-i Nur itself was apparently Muslim (*ibid.*: 29, 57).

It is a locally accepted fact that Darra-i Nur was converted considerably later than the neighbouring valley of Alingar (1582); and as Darra-i Nur was said to be *kafir* still at the time of Jahangir, but Muslim at the time of Abdur Rahman, the conversion must have taken place sometime between the middle of the 17th century and the end of the 19th century. The name Deishamir is not, to my knowledge, found in any written historical record, so for the more precise timing we must rely on the oral tradition. The best chronological source is the genealogies of the Sotan lineages; all the different informants from Sotan traced their ancestry back to Deishamir and gave the genealogical depth of their lineage as nine or ten generations. Allowing about 30 years per generation, and noting that the youngest lineage member was most often the son or the grandson of the informant, this would set the time of Deishamir at the first decades of the 18th century.

One village elder, however, had in his possession a written genealogy of his lineage which contained no less than 23 "generations," beginning with Deishamir. It might be argued that such a written document is more reliable than the orally transmitted genealogies, which may be subject to the well-known mechanism of "telescoping" (e. g., Fortes 1945: 35). But in the first place, the genealogies collected from different informants showed a high degree of consistency, and secondly, the written document gave Deishamir as the successor of the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707); it actually put Deishamir down as the son of Aurangzeb, while the owner of the document stated orally that Deishamir originated in Kunar, being a descendant of Amir Chaghân, the "founder" of Chaga Serai. So with respect to time, the name Aurangzeb fits quite well, and I think that the large number of names in the written "genealogy" were included to establish an impressive pedigree of the family, and that they should not all be thought of as related by lineal descent. It should be noted, also, that the written genealogy showed a few instances of "duplication" (Henige 1982: 99), i. e., that certain pairs of names were found more than once in the list. Even though there was contemporarily a

slight tendency to give a boy the name of his grandfather, duplication in a list of this length should add to our suspicions. So I believe, on the basis of the orally transmitted genealogies, that it is fair to assume that the conquest and conversion of Darra-i Nur by Deishamir took place in the early 18th century, and this, at least is not contradicted by any outside historical source.

But there is one point in the ethnohistorical account which does not at all agree with this assumption. The name Bhim Raja was repeatedly mentioned by informants, who stated that this person was defeated and/or converted by Deishamir. Already Colonel Tanner, the first European to visit Darra-i Nur, related the tradition that Bambakot was "the reputed capital of the Hindu Bim Raja" (1881: 294), and both Jettmar (personal communication; see also Jettmar 1980) and Wutt (1978: 48, 1981: 108) suggest that the reference is to Bhim (or Bhima), a ruler of the Hindu Shahi dynasty, who ruled over part of Afghanistan and the Punjab A.D. 921–960. This pushes us more than 700 years further back in time, so some kind of explanation is certainly called for!

Now, the evidence pointing to the presence of Bhim and other rulers of the Hindu Shahi dynasty in Darra-i Nur, and in the Laghman area as a whole, cannot be dismissed entirely. The local tradition of Hindu *rajas* in Darra-i Nur is supported by archaeological findings: Marble stone fragments from an ancient Hindu temple at Islampur, and Hindu Shahi coins at Qala-i Shahi (Fischer 1969: 357–358). Historical scholarship informs us that Bhim's successor, Jayapala, was defeated by Subuktigin, the father of Mahmud of Ghazni, in 991, while trying to defend "a strategic position on a lofty hill near Lamghan" (Mishra 1972: 108); Bambakot might answer to that description. The result was that "the provinces of Jalalabad and Kabul (Lamghanat) were thus annexed and forcibly converted to Muhammadianism" (*ibid.*: 109). So while it is, of course, possible that Bhim Raja, from whom the village of Bambakot, is said to derive its name, is identical with the Hindu Shahi ruler Bhim, it remains equally possible that the concrete connection is a fabrication. Henige (1982: 99–100) has noted the widespread tendency to associate place names with more or less fictitious personages in order to lend credibility to otherwise dubious genealogies

or dynastic traditions.⁷ By "fabrication" I do not mean to imply any conscious effort on the part of the Pashai to tamper with their history, insofar as the identity of their local Bhim Raja and the Hindu Shahi Bhim has been suggested not by themselves but by outside scholars. Be that as it may, we must still admit that a certain connection of the Hindu Shahis with the Pashai population of the Laghman area is a possibility. I find it quite unlikely, however, that Bambakot should have been the capital of the Hindu Shahi Bhim. Mishra has collated evidence that this capital, a large fortified temple town variously known as Bhimnagar, Nagarkot, or Bhimkot, "was situated somewhere between the Indus and the Chenab," i. e., in the Punjab (Mishra 1972: 71). The city was conquered and sacked by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1009 (*ibid.*: 69), the year after he had crossed the Indus, following his victory at the battle of Waihind. Further, since the Gardezi noted that Mahmud conquered Darra-i Nur in 1020–21 (Raverty 1881–1888: 135), we must assume that he had not been there already 12 years before.

Whatever the concrete details, the association of the Hindu Shahis with the Pashai population would seem to support Morgenstierne's contention of the pre-Muslim Pashai as part of a Hindu civilization in the plains. But an association does not necessarily imply an identity; the Pashai tribes in the side-valleys off the Kabul Valley may well at one time have found themselves on the periphery of, or nominally just inside, a Hindu Shahi kingdom (just as they are today nominally part of the nation-state of Afghanistan), but it certainly does not follow that they also inhabited the main Kabul Valley, or dominated it by *their* language, *their* religion, and *their* state administration. Indeed, on comparative anthropological grounds (and in the absence of any specific evidence) the

⁷ Henige speaks of "the many medieval chroniclers who created scores of non-existent rulers by taking the names of towns, rivers, mountains, and the like and making kings' names from them. The chroniclers then claimed that the kings they invented founded the towns or named the rivers, which in turn were used to prove that the kings really existed! Several centuries later, this carefree approach can be rather amusing, until we remember that it was long regarded as acceptable history because it was what people wanted to believe" (1982: 99–100). Even if Bhim cannot be taken to be wholly fictitious, I think the point is still a valid one in this connection.

likelihood is quite strong that in terms of social organization the contemporary tribally organized Pashai groups look rather like they did a millennium ago. It is being increasingly recognized that tribal organization is often a by-product of the emergence of centralized states; most tribes "may well be the product of processes stimulated by the appearance of relatively highly organized societies amidst other societies which are organized much more simply" (Fried 1967: 15).

Granted some kind of connection between the Pashai people of Darra-i Nur and the *raja* Bhim of the Hindu Shahi dynasty, we are still left with the problem of accounting for the temporal association of Bhim with Deishamir, on which the local oral tradition insists, but which seems so unlikely from other points of view, as there can be no mistake about the dating of Bhim (921-960), and little doubt, I contend, as to the approximate time of the conversion of Darra-i Nur by Deishamir (early 18th century). The explanation I propose is based on the fact that the inhabitants of Darra-i Nur are Muslims and that Islam is their absolute and dominant ideology.⁸ They trace their genealogy back to a common ancestor, the man who converted the area; whenever I tried to probe further back in time I drew a blank. It was admitted that there were earlier *kafirs*, but everything that had to do with the history of the present population was ascribed to the time of Deishamir or later. Thus, the whole area abounds in what are clearly pre-Islamic remains (tombs of heroes, phallic monoliths, wine presses, and burial chambers carved into the rock, etc.); but whenever legends of named persons were attached to such remains (and even though the names were decidedly un-Islamic), the events of the legends were construed to date from "historical," Muslim time. It seems reasonable, then, to suggest that in connection with the conquest and conversion of Darra-i Nur we are actually dealing with two series of events, which are separated by more than 700 years. The first is the Ghaznavid conquest of the Laghman and Jalalabad plains, including the incursion into the (lower) Darra-i Nur by the turn of the 11th century, which meant the defeat of the

Hindu Shahis. The second is the much more local invasion and conversion by Deishamir of Darra-i Nur, probably in the early 18th century. I am suggesting, simply, that these two series of events are conflated in the native consciousness. If such a conflation seems improbable to us, we should bear in mind, firstly, that these people do not have any written historical record and that their time-reckoning is not tied to an absolute, calendar-based chronology like ours, and secondly, that it is the conversion which is felt to be the important thing. Related to the nature of Islam as a total ideology is the feeling that any conversion to Islam must perforce be definitive and irreversible. It is thus inconceivable to the native mind that a (Hindu) *kafir raja* should have been ousted from the area by (Ghaznavid) Muslims while the population locally remained *kafir*, or at least gradually reverted to their former *kafir* ways. So the only way to achieve consistency in the local historical tradition is to assume that Bhim Raja was contemporary with Deishamir.

3. Conquest, Conversion, and Land-tenure

In the last part of this paper, I shall comment on one further aspect of the (final) conversion of Darra-i Nur, which will also place my case-study in a regional, comparative perspective. It concerns the question of the specific ethnic (Pashai) character of the conquest of Darra-i Nur, a question which in some sense also touches the problems of ethnic distribution pointed to in the beginning.

It is usually assumed that the conversion to Islam of the various Pashai valleys was effected by Pakhtuns moving up into the valley from the main Kabul and Kunar valleys (though we have concrete evidence only for Laghman; Scarcia 1965). I mentioned, however, that for Darra-i Nur the conquest/conversion happened from the northeast, across the mountains. This information I had from at least three independent informants, who related in detail how Deishamir had come to Sotan from Kunar, via Pech, and how, after having settled in Sotan, he had expanded southward, become the master of the entire valley, and had finally established friendly relations with the Sayyeds of the Shewa region, who had allowed him to make Islampur a place of resort. Even so,

⁸ I have elsewhere (Ovesen forthcoming) dealt with the influence of Muslim ideology on the traditional Pashai ("Dardic") world view.

this route into the valley appears so "unexpected" that it is often not realized among the people themselves, as it is felt "natural" that, like other, contemporary "civilizing" influences (cf. Ovesen 1983b), also the conversion should have spread from the plains. Indeed, this is precisely the one point at which my account of the ethnohistorical tradition departs from that of Wutt, who repeatedly states (1978: 44, 46; 1981: 65, 67, 98-99) that Deishamir invaded Darra-i Nur from the south, via Jalalabad and Shewa, and relates a local opinion that he had come originally from Iran or Arabia. I also heard the latter opinion expressed, but in comparison with the details with which the north-east version was surrounded, the southern version strikes me as less well founded and as rather an automatic assumption which has the merit of being in agreement with the over-all cultural/religious direction of expansion of the present age as well as of the past. I see no reason, however, to doubt my very coherent informants on this score, inasmuch as the presumed fact that Deishamir came from the north-east and expanded southward from the central part of the valley may also help to explain the special feature that Darra-i Nur, alone among the whole series of side-valleys, is populated by Pashai speakers right down to the main Kunar basin. At least since their conversion to Islam, the Pashai groups, with the exception of those in Darra-i Nur, have been, or are being gradually replaced by Pakhtuns in the lower parts of their side-valleys; this is the case in the Kapisa area (Evans 1977), in Laghman (Snoy 1967), and in the Mazar, Nurgal, and Pech valleys (Tanner 1881). But the mere fact that in Darra-i Nur the conversion (and conquest) spread from the upper valley and downward may well account for the fact that the ethnic boundary here still extends down to the valley bottom, and that the process of "Pashtunization" (Anderson 1978) is thus here a much more recent phenomenon of "modernization" (cf. Ovesen 1982: 158, 1983b).

The question of land-tenure seems to me to be related to this issue. It was mentioned that when Deishamir had conquered the valley, he decided to distribute the land permanently among his followers. This is perhaps not so surprising in itself; the interesting thing is that it was explicitly stated that he elected *not* to introduce the system

of rotating land-tenure, or periodic re-allotment, known as *wesh* which he was said to know about from Chitral.⁹ The *wesh* system has been the subject of some discussion; it seems well established that it was invented by a certain Shaikh Malli and first introduced by Pakhtun missionaries in connection with the conquest and Islamic conversion of Swat in the early 16th century (Barth 1959: 9-10). In an interesting re-analysis of Barth's material, Meeker (1980) has suggested that the history and contemporary situation in Swat is best understood in the light of what he calls the heroic tradition among some tribal peoples. The conquest of Swat by Yusufzai Pakhtuns was a conquest of a rich agricultural area by a group of tribal warriors who cherished violence and heroic deeds as core values. The *wesh* system, Meeker argues, represented a way of reconciling these values with the agricultural need for peace and prosperity:

At the time of their victory [the Pakhtuns] were too devoted to a life of violent expropriations to become wholly sedentary gentry and too egalitarian in their ideals and values to organise themselves in a feudal hierarchy as lords of domains. By means of the *wesh* systems, they preserved to some degree their identity as heroic peoples and institutionalised an *unstable* political situation. Thanks to the ingenuity of Shaikh Malli, heroic peoples who lived by resorting to force and coercion became landowners in an agrarian society dependent upon diligent labour and peaceful co-operation (Meeker 1980: 699-689).

The *wesh* system was introduced not only in Swat but also in the Indus Kohistan; and wherever it was introduced, it was in connection with Islamic conversion. Jettmar (1961: 85) has made the point that, indeed, it was often conceived as part and parcel of the True Faith. In an important recent contribution, Jettmar (1983), adopting a different perspective from that of Meeker, has argued that the *wesh* system represented an Islamic political and social utopia, a kind of quasi-communist reform, and that, further, the system actually served to integrate and strengthen the segmentary lineage systems of the Kohistanis (i.e., the "Dardic" groups of Indus Kohistan) and

⁹ In actual fact, the *wesh* system was never practiced in Chitral, but we must bear with some geographical imprecision in this respect.

thus enabled them to ward off Pakhtun attempts at invasion.

This may well have been the short-term, political function of the *wesh* system, but in the long run, the system was to have deleterious consequences for agriculture. This has been pointed out by Staley (1969: 236), who credited Aurel Stein for being the first to note the fact. Already Raverty, however, had made a similar observation and described how in Swat the re-allotment was effectuated by the drawing of lots (Raverty 1881–1888: 208–209). Furthermore, Raverty's authority was a much older source, namely the 17th century warrior-poet Khushal Khan of the Khatak tribe of Pakhtuns. As a Khatak, Khushal Khan had good historical reasons to despise the arch-enemy, the Yusufzai (Caroe 1958: 221–246), and here is what he had to say of Swat and the practice of *wesh*:

Although the whole country is suitable for gardens,
The Yusufzais have made it unto a desert wild. . . .
Such a country, with such climate, and such streams,
It hath no homes, no gardens, nothing fragrant or fresh.
They gamble away the country yearly, drawing lots:
Without an invading army they ravage themselves
(translated and quoted by Raverty).

Quite plainly, if a man knows that he is only going to cultivate a certain plot of land for a limited period of time, he may not be sufficiently motivated to put in the great effort to maintain the irrigation channels and terrasse walls, and when the economic base is being undermined, the social system is likely to follow suit, so the *wesh* system may well be partly responsible for that "looseness in structure, disintegration and local variability, in part abandonment of fields and loss of ancient engineering skills" which Barth (1956: 79) found in Indus Kohistan (cf. Ovesen 1981b).

So even if introducing the *wesh* system was somehow felt to be the proper thing for a conquering converter-hero such as Deishamir to do, there is at least the chance that those possible consequences were realized by him, and this may be one of the reasons why he did not do it. Another reason may be, as Jettmar (1983: 511) has stressed, that the *wesh* system was not only felt to be intimately connected with Islamic conversion in the area, it was also seen very much as a specifically Pakhtun phenomenon. So not adopting the *wesh* system could also be seen as a way of

signalling the fact that Darra-i Nur was free of Pakhtun domination.

4. Conclusion

The specific conclusions regarding the Islamic conversion of Darra-i Nur may be summarized as follows: By initially conquering and converting the valley from the north-east, Deishamir, as a Pashai, performed a feat comparable to what Pakhtuns had done elsewhere from the south. By *not* introducing the *wesh* system, he in fact strengthened the economic cohesion of the valley, which also contributed to rendering it more immune to "Pashtunization." And, finally, by being both a conquerer and the converter, he furnished the population with an ideological focus and provided a "beginning" of their history, with the result that all earlier events were assimilated chronologically with the time of the conversion.

From the perspective of regional comparison, the case-study of the ethnohistory of Darra-i Nur may introduce a variation in the standard picture of Pakhtun expansion in the area, and thus perhaps also indicate that even the cases which conform better to the standard picture may warrant closer scrutiny. Given the general historical and cultural situation of the ethnic groups in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan and north Pakistan, further case-studies may still produce interesting local variations, and the less we feel bound by received opinions about presumed historical origins and linguistic divides, the greater is our chance of some day arriving at a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of the region.

Abstract. – *The distant past of the Pashai-speaking groups in eastern Afghanistan is still a matter of some controversy. This paper argues for a closer cultural and historical affinity between the Pashai and the other groups of mountain tribes in "Dardistan" than what is admitted by linguistically based scholarship. It thus supports and adduces further evidence for the position of Keiser (1974) and suggests that historical linguistics has been led astray in its attempt to reconstruct the ancient history of the Pashai. In the second part of the paper is presented an analysis of the ethnohistorical tradition of one particular Pashai group, and this case is placed within the framework of regional comparison. [Afghanistan, Pashai, Historical anthropology, Islamic conversion]*

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